

Siting a Garden

Community and School Gardens

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When selecting a location for a community garden, the most important site considerations are sunlight exposure, water availability and slope. Other important considerations include access to the site by community members, space for vehicles, a tool shed and compost bins.

Sunlight Exposure

All vegetables and fruits require full sun to grow properly. This means a minimum of six to eight hours of direct sunlight a day. Vegetables grown in the shade will be leggy, have fewer flowers and yield far less than if they were grown in the sun. Keep in mind that large trees cast big shadows, especially in the spring and fall. Ideally, the garden site should have no trees adjacent to the south side of the garden. If possible, watch the movement of the sunlight across the site over a period of time to determine sunlight availability.

Water Availability

Fruits and vegetables are made up mostly of water. Without adequate water they will not yield properly and may even die. In the heat of the summer, it takes about 1,000 gallons of water a week (or a 1-inch rainfall) to water 1,000 square feet of garden area. This works out to about 1 gallon per square foot of garden space to provide enough water for plants to live during the growing season. This moisture can come from rain or supplemental watering.

Examine the site for any existing spigots or water lines running into buildings. It can be expensive to make a new connection to the city water system, so try to locate water nearby. It is reasonable to run 100 feet of hose from a spigot, but beyond that distance it can be a nuisance. Rain barrels will help provide water for containers and very small beds; however, keep in mind that a 50-gallon rain barrel can only water about 40 square feet of garden space. When you need water the most, the barrel will often be empty.

Slope

A site with a steep slope will have a greater risk of soil erosion. Steep slopes are also difficult to walk on and may be impossible for disabled gardeners. The best garden site is one where the difference in height is no more than 1 to 2 feet for every 100 feet of garden area. Much more than that will require some soil moving, terracing or walls. The maximum slope for wheelchair access is no more than 5 feet in 100 feet.

Garden Access

A community garden should be accessible to the people it serves, whether by foot, bus or car. If gardeners are to arrive by car, then parking will be needed. If by bus, a bus stop should be close by and the bus line should be connected to the community served. If by foot, then sidewalks along the street will make access safe for gardeners.

Once at the garden, users should be able to make their way through the site to get to their garden area. Provisions should be made for access by truck to at least some area in the garden to make deliveries of compost, soil and mulch easier. Walkways in the garden should be wide enough for comfortable access.



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Tool Storage

Tools will need to be stored in a location that is easy for all gardeners to access. This can be a small building, waterproof locker or even a room in a nearby building. The tools should be locked up, possibly with a combination lock so all gardeners can have access. The tool storage area should include space for hand tools, a wheelbarrow or cart, shovels and rakes, garden hoses and any other tools shared by the gardeners. Most cities and towns have ordinances that control construction. Check with your local planning office to stay within the law.

Compost Bins

Every community garden area should have a place for composting, whether formal or informal. This space can be anything from a few square feet to a much larger area to accommodate several bins for storage and composting organic waste. Compost bins should be accessible by a vehicle as well as to everyone in the garden.

Other Amenities

It is unlikely that a garden site will be perfect; however, it is best to find a site that has as many positive features as possible. It costs time and money to build things and shape the landscape, so finding a site with a good combination of desirable features makes sense. Several other site amenities would be nice to have at a community garden site, although they are not essential.

- Access to a bathroom saves time and makes the garden more family-friendly.
- A fence can help keep animals and vandals out and is an excellent place for trailing vines.
- Night lighting can be very useful early in the season when the days are short.
- A shady seating area provides a place to rest.
- A play area can help keep children amused and occupied.
- A drinking water fountain provides a place for gardeners to refresh themselves after a hot day of gardening.

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